LINGUISTIC RESOURCES FOR COMPLAINTS IN CONVERSATION

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ABSTRACT

Complaints might be thought *a priori* to be a good place to find paralinguistic features in a natural setting. Using conversation analytic methodology, I argue that the phonetic design of complaints is mostly determined by other sequential features of the turn in which the complaint is delivered. In particular, a turn delivering a complaint can either be marked as designed to receive an affiliative reponse (and thus a continuation of the activity of complaining), or marked as closing down the complaint sequence.

Keywords: paralinguistics, complaints, conversation, prosody, English.

1. INTRODUCTION

A number of recent studies (such as papers in [1]) have shown that much fine phonetic detail (FPD) in naturally-occurring conversation relates to levels of linguistic description beyond the merely local: for instance, many aspects of turn-taking or marking the relation of one turn at talk to another (by the same or a different speaker) implicate phonetic detail which one might assume speaker/hearers cannot attend to, nor produce in ways that generate meaning. In other words, much FPD can relate to structural and contextual detail.

FPD (some of which is 'paralinguistic') may often be used to index various kinds of non-lexical meaning, such as sociolinguistically salient features [2], but also things that are less easy to gloss, such as (dis-)alignment with another speaker, or handling turn-taking. The work reported in this paper is part of a wider project [3] looking at linguistic markers of affiliation and disaffiliation in a range of activities, such as offering, requesting, assessing and complaining.

A priori, one might expect complaints to be produced with features such as wide pitch span and high f0 (features with paralinguistic meanings glossed as 'authoritative', 'not friendly'), and loud ('more surprised, more urgent' [4]).

This is difficult to demonstrate however, because our study shows that 'complaints' as such are hard to pin down: complaining is typically done over a longer stretch of talk and involves many sub-activities, such as assessing, telling a story, or providing an opportunity for conversationalists to display mutual affiliation through the co-construction of a complaint about a third party. This interactional complexity raises the question: what are the linguistic resources used in producing a complaint, and what levels of meaning do they relate to?

2. DATA

The data on which this paper is based are taken from a collection of approximately 80 complaint sequences. The data are all recordings of naturally-occurring telephone conversations, recorded in the the USA and the UK. The total duration of the corpora is around 20hr. The complaints are all complaints about third parties, or complaints about some external event (such as the weather): complaints by one participant addressing the behaviour of the co-participant (e.g. *you didn't call me*), or the institution which one participant represents, are excluded.

3. METHODS

This work used the established methodology of conversation analytically influenced phonetic work [1], [5]. This methodology seeks to demonstrate conversationalists' orientation to the categories posited as one of its main argumentational techniques. An important aspect of this method are to show how a turn is understood and treated both by its speaker and its listener; and one of its useful consequences for the study of conversation is that it makes it possible to establish grounds for the comparability of turns at talk.

4. THE ACTIVITY OF COMPLAINING

Complaints are made over a sequence of talk. Whether something 'is' a complaint is an analysis made by conversationalists [6], and may not be inherent in the propositional content of an utterance. For instance, there is nothing in the

utterance *they cut five people off last Thursday* that necessarily makes it a complaint (and, in the right context, this might work as a compliment or a boast). However, the recipient treats it as a complaint in her response: *that's a nuisance isn't it, they're getting terrible*. These are negative assessments of the phone company and they align with a possible complainable in the base turn. Constructing a complaint jointly is one way for two conversationalists to affiliate with one another, through their shared stance towards the complainable.

Since complaining is done through a sequence, conversationalists have at least two problems to solve: how to make a turn hearable as a complaint, and how to handle the transition out of a complaint sequence into some other stretch of talk.

In the next two sections, I argue that there are two distinct turn designs in which complaints are made. These two turn designs have different lexical, sequential, interactional and phonetic constructions, with different implications for how a recipient should treat each kind of turn. In the first kind, the turn is designed to get an affiliative response; in the second kind, the turn is designed to close down (or exit) the current sequence.

4.1.   A-COMPLAINTS

A-Complaints are turn constructional units that contain complaints which are designed to get an affiliative response from the recipient. They are the commonest kind of complaint in the collection, partly because they commonly occur one after another.

At the lexical level, such complaints often have an extreme lexical formulation (e.g. *well honestly Les, she treats us all like dirt*); they are often (negative) assessments (#2 below *to do it with eleven year olds is absolutely inexcusable*), contain expletives (#5 below *oh I went to the dentist and-uh God he wanted to pull a tooth*), or make reference to a quantity (e.g. of time or money) that is presented as inappropriate (#5 below *make me a new gold bridge for $800*, #3 below *her time for getting up is six o'clock*).

A-Complaints are often made at sequential locations in talk where an affiliative response from the recipient is relevant, e.g. on possible completion of a story, or as an assessment. In the first instance, a recipient is normatively expected to display their appreciation of the story, and if they do not do this, the storyteller generally provides

another opportunity for the recipient to display their appreciation; in the second instance, failure to make a second assessment is routinely treated as disagreement [7].

Possible affiliative responsive actions to complaints include a confirmatory assessment (*he can make me so damn mad I could bop him || well that's the way with me too*), or a collaborative telling or complaint (*well I really was cross I mean || yes she hasn't given you much notice*). Such affiliative responses are phonetically and prosodically matched to the base turn (cf. [8]).

Recipients can also withhold such a response (e.g. by silence or a delayed response; by providing only minimal agreement; by challenging the complaint; by treating the complaint as a misfortune); in this case, the complainant regularly repeats or reformulates the complaint (thereby providing another opportunity for an affiliative response); or makes a move to close the complaining sequence.

At the phonetic level, A-complaints have f0 which is sustained above the speaker's average. The pitch span is often narrow throughout the intonation phrase until its completion; but it may also be wide, as in (1), (2) and (3) below, which have accented syllables with Low tones as well as High. They are often loud, produced fast, and their pitch peaks (especially on the nuclear item) tend to be high in the speaker's range (marked with ↑) — for example, (1), (2), (4) and (5) below have f0 peaks c.3 semitones below the top of the speaker's range; preceding stretches of talk are also commonly high in the speaker's range. A-complaints are often produced with a high degree of rhythmicity.

1.   {| and ↑`she's `been in ↑↑\bed for a /week | and ↑`won't get ↑\up |}f

2. | I mean I ↑\think this sort of thing is \bad e/nough | ↑when it comes ↑`later at `O-levels and ↑\A-levels but to ↑↑\do it with e\leven-year olds is ↑↑\ʔabsolutely ↑↑\ʔinexcusable |

3. | well it /seems her time for getting {↑\up}f is six o'{↑\clock}f |

4. | so I didn't even {↑`dress \up}f (.)| I made the {↑↑`prettiest ↑↑\/dress}f | and I got ↑`blue ↑-shoes and everything↑ |

5. | ↑\oh I \went to to the \/dentist | and-uh \God he \wanted to \pull a \tooth and \make me a new gold-uh (.) ↑\bridge for (.) {↑↑\eight hundred dollars}f |

6. | ↑`such a {↑`schmucky ↑\kid}_f you /know (.) |
    I was ↑`so ↑\aggravated |

4.2. X-COMPLAINTS

Not all turns conveying complaints have the features just described. X-complaints are complaints which are designed to close down the current sequence. By exiting one sequence a new one may be started, so allowing for shift of talk from one topic to another. These turns often have the role of 'summarising' what has been said earlier in the sequence. This is reflected by the fact that at the lexical level, X-complaints often contain idiomatic expressions [9]; or assessments [10]; and they also often recycle words used earlier.

Conversationalists orient to X-complaints by closing down the current sequence and starting a new one. In aligning with an X-complaint, a recipient is also aligning with the move out of the complaint sequence and into a new one, rather than aligning with the complaint *per se*.

X complaints at the phonetic level have features similar to other sequence-closing turns [11]: they are produced relatively quiet, with a narrow pitch span, low in the speaker's range and with an overall 'lax' setting (e.g. more open articulations, less peripheral vowels, low subglottal pressure). Thus the phonetic features of X-complaints are more generic features of sequence-closing turns, rather than the phonetics of complaints (c.f. discussion in [8] and [10]).

5. AN EXAMPLE

The extract below contains examples of A-complaints and an X-complaint.

```
1   E   well you know we were there in June
2       you know Bud played golf and-uh
3       when the air conditioner went off
4       .hh we were about the only ones that
5       had an air conditioned room
6       the rest of `em were broken .hhh
7       and we went down to breakfast
8       and there was only about two people to
9       help for breakfast with all these guys
10      going to play golf
11      they were all teed off
12  L   ye[ah
13  E     [.hhhh because ↑Bud couldn't even eat
14      his breakfast
15  E   he ordered he waited forty-five minutes
16      and he had to be out there to tee off
17      so I gave it to-uh Karen's little boy
18      (0.7)
19  E   I mean that's how bad the service was
20      .h .hh
21  E   it's gone to pot
22  L   oh::: [yeah
23  E         [but it's a beautiful golf course
```

E is complaining to L about a place where she and her husband, Bud, stayed. The complaint is presented as a story, and there are several episodes in the story that are presented complainables: lack of air conditioning (l.3-6), lack of service at breakfast (l.8-11) and the resulting delay and inconvenience (l.15-17).

The underlined turn constructional units are constructed as A-complaints. Figs. 1-3 show f0 traces for these units, scaled to the speaker's pitch range, and her average f0 (taken from a representative sample of her speech elsewhere) marked at 218Hz. In these three stretches (all produced loud), the average f0 is about 1.5 semitones above the speaker's normal average, and barely goes below her average f0 until the final tone group, where the widest pitch excursion occurs.
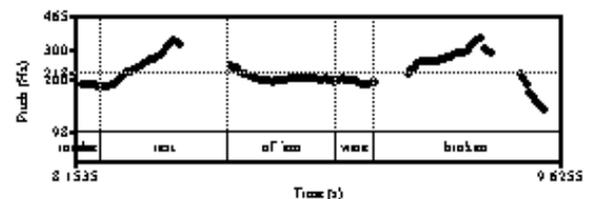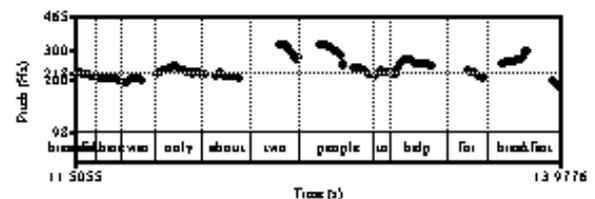

Fig. 1. *the rest of `em were broken*
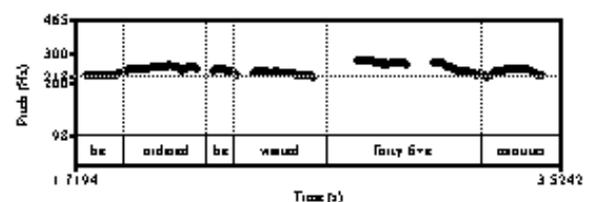

Fig 2. *there was only about two people…*

Fig 3. *he ordered he waited 45 minutes*

At l.12 L has a place to mark her recipiency of the story, and to display her understanding of it so far. She produces a continuer *yeah*, which aligns with the continued delivery of the complaint without affiliating with it. E continues in lines 13-17 with the story and extends her complaint. On its possible completion, at line 18, L has another opportunity to display her understanding of the story so far; but she withholds this. E orients to L's lack of affiliation with a turn in l.19 which

explicates what the story was about (as marked by the turn-initial *I mean*), and therefore indicating to L how she was expected to have received it. On its completion, L has another oportunity to display affiliation with the complaint. Again, she desists.

In l.21, E presents a turn which summarises her complaint by using an idiomatic expression, *it's gone to pot*. The production of this is quieter and lower in her range than the preceding turns, with an average f0 of 142Hz, and creaky voice: this is an X-complaint. L does a minimal (and sequentially late) receipt of the complaint, and E's next turn is a different action: a positive assessment of the golf course. Over the course of this complaint sequence, then, E produces A-complaints and then an X-complaint; the sequential location, the implications for a relevant next action, the lexical design and the phonetic design of these two types of turn are different.
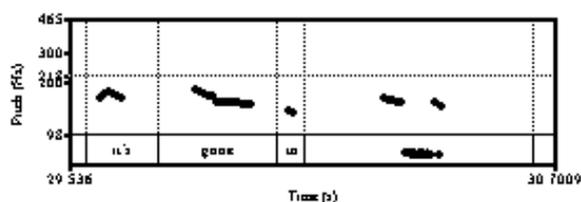
6. CONCLUSIONS

Turn constructional units that contain complaints are regularly produced in several ways. There is no simple mapping between 'complaining' and the phonetic design of a complaint, although literature on intonation is replete with claims that associate attitudinal meanings with pitch contours or the speaker's pitch span [e.g. 12]. Speakers do not have just, or even primarily, phonetic resources available for producing turns that are hearable as complaints. Other important resources are the sequential context and the lexical design of the turn. The phonetic design of the turn relates as much—if not more—to the sequential position of the turn and other actions promoted though the turn; and turns which convey complaints are frequently implicated in other actions. It is therefore useful to think of the sequential (and thereby interactional) function of a turn through which complaining is constructed. The apparently paralinguistic features of these turns have other explanations that are rooted in three levels: (1) matters relating to the moment-by-moment unfolding of talk, such as managing the transition

from one speaker to another; (2) handling generic activities like "affiliation"; (3) handling the status of turns in a longer sequence of turns, such as sequence ending. A-complaints occur at places in sequence where an affiliative response from a recipient is made relevant; if the design of such complaints reflects their status as turns designed to get an affiliative response (cf. [8]), rather than their status of 'complaint', then their phonetic characteristics are explained in a more generic way.

7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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